

The Philippine Progressive Movement in the 1990s

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A how me to point out that while I am the President of Bagong Alyansang Makabayan (BAYAN), the views that I share here are essentially my own. Nonetheless, my political sentiments cannot be divorced from my experiences and convictions as an active member of BAYAN. The same holds true for my current responsibilities in parliamentary work as an active member of the Partido ng Bayan (PnB).

Taking off from the Third World Studies Center's eight guide questions, I wish to raise several counter-questions, firstly, to Clarify certain assumptions made in that invitation and, secondly, to serve as my frame of reference for the points I intend to focus on.

On the Failure of the Socialist Path to Development

The guide questions mention international developments with such certainty even if there is still a lot of debate going on. It cites "the failure of the socialist path to development" which, I am afraid, is an opinion not shared by many within the progressive movement in the international community. There is a more common understanding that socialism is in crisis today as several countries on the socialist path to development have deviated from this path and ultimately collapsed under the leadership of their political parties.

If I understand it correctly, the many proponents of socialism among workers' parties, socialist parties; and communist parties in the Asia-Pacific, Europe, and Africa are currently debating over the correctness of the line taken by the leaders of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union whose governments and parties have collapsed as a result of mass upheavals. National liberation movements have likewise condemned the leadership of these governments and parties for having distanced themselves from the masses. Instead of democratizing power down to the grassroots, these leaders have functioned more as self-serving bureaucrats imposing their will on the masses.

As pointed out in a discussion paper of the South African Communist Party, the massive uprisings against the Eastern European regimes were “popular revolts against unpopular regimes,” and “if socialists are unable to come to terms with this reality, the future of socialism is indeed bleak.”

The debates are intense and ongoing. The range of condemnation of the incorrectness of the path taken varies considerably. There are those who have labelled this “failed path to socialism” as the revisionist road, and therefore not the socialist path. Armando Liwanag of the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) says that the problem is the emergence of modern revisionism *that* has encroached on the programs and policies of these political parties and governments. In the case of the former Soviet Union, Armando Liwanag traces modern revisionism to the regime of Nikita Krushchev. However, while upholding Stalin’s achievement in developing a strong and industrial Soviet state second only to the United States after World War II, he points out Stalin’s mistake in prematurely declaring that there were no more exploiting classes and class struggle in the Soviet Union. This mistake became all the more serious considering that it was during the time of Stalin that bureaucratism rapidly developed within the Soviet party and the government which, according to Liwanag, became the “base of modern revisionism.” A similar position is shared by the Worker’s Party of Bangladesh and the Communist Party of Japan-Left.

Party and government alienation from the people achieved through bureaucratic-authoritarian rule is a common thread that runs through the range of criticism against the collapsed leaders of both Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. Differences, however, are reflected in analyzing the roots of socialist deviation. Others point to the early days of Stalin as the origin of bureaucratism and the beginning of socialist deviation. Some view Krushchev as an improvement over Stalin, although he did not succeed in rectifying the distortions of socialist rule rooted in corruption and authoritarianism.

While the debate continues, what matters is to avoid throwing the baby along with the tub of water. Joe Slovo of the South African Communist Party says it sharply when he asks: “have we the right to conclude that the enemies of a discredited party leadership are the same as the enemies of socialism? U the type of socialism which the people have experienced has been rubbished in their eyes and they begin to question it, are they necessarily questioning socialism or are they rejecting its perversion?”

This, in fact, is what strongly concerns BAYAN. Considering the long absence of mass participation in socialist reconstruction, the failure of mass struggles and independent people's organizations in providing the necessary check and balance against governmental abuse, the mass upheavals that followed in 1989 could only be the logical outbreak of a populace that had long been deprived of its right to have its voice heard and its vote counted.

On the Domestic Struggle

It is this same concern that I express regarding the guide question's commentary on domestic developments, and I quote: "the present armed struggle has lost its luster and ,attraction as the answer to the deeply rooted problems of Philippine society. Even the various militant mass movements suffer from the epidemic which has afflicted alternative political movements all over the world, compounded locally by the difficulty to adopt old forms and frameworks to the post-dictatorship era."

I do not understand the basis of the conclusion that the armed struggle has "lost its luster" as an answer to the ills of Philippine society; nor its reference to the problems of the Left as an "epidemic" that has afflicted movements all over the world. It sees the answer to the ills of mass poverty and underdevelopment today in the President's proposal for a peace settlement, an offer it considers significant as a "point of departure" for the movement to enter into "a new era of struggle."

While we are presently immersed in a campaign to project a comprehensive agenda for a just and lasting peace – in response to the President's offer – we cannot, however, share the optimism that elevates the Ramos peace offer into a "new era of struggle" for the mass movement

Neither will we presume to speak for the organized and armed resistance movement in concluding that traditional methods of revolutionary struggle have lost their "luster" in the face of the Ramos proposal for a peace settlement

It is true that President Ramos, a former general, has taken initial steps towards the peace effort, most notably the repeal of Republic Act 1700 (Anti Subversion Law) and the release of some political prisoners. This has certainly helped a little. But there are still more than 500 prisoners locked

up in detention. Republic Act 1700 has hardly been used against political offenses. There is Presidential Decree 1866 (Illegal Possession of Firearms Law) making criminals out of political offenders. There are several questionable decisions concerning warrantless arrests, the legality of zoning operations, and checkpoints made by the Supreme Court that violate our political rights.

Military operations that include strafing and bombing continue to kill people, dislocate their economies, and uproot their villages. According to President Ramos, Senator Rodolfo Biazon's proposal to disband the notorious Civilian Armed Forces Geographical Units cannot be realized. The increasing occurrence of common crimes can be traced to the orientation and practice of the law enforcers themselves such as the Philippine National Police and the Armed Forces of the Philippines. Mr. Ramos has not yet come up with a formula to correct this.

With regards to the need for basic economic reforms, Mr. Ramos has stood adamant in refusing a debt cap to the onerous foreign debt we inherited from both Mr. Marcos and Mrs. Aquino. Agrarian reform is nowhere near implementation, and I am even referring here to the watered-down land reform program of Mrs. Aquino. Instead, Mr. Ramos is bent on pushing through with the creation of nationwide industrial zones, converting with impunity prime agricultural lands intended for agrarian reform.

There is really nothing new in the Ramos development agenda that distinguishes it from the discredited development policies and programs of both Marcos and Aquino. Under the auspices of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, these policies and programs have reduced the Philippines into the basketcase of Southeast Asia for the past twenty five years.

While we may give praise to the President for being an early riser and a hard worker, what ultimately matters is his incapacity to address structural issues that demand an overhaul of arrangements in relationships, whether on matters of national integrity such as economic and military ties between the Philippines and the United States, or the foreign debt, or on matters of democratizing wealth and power, such as the adoption of a genuine agrarian reform program, and the advocacy of human rights.

The armed struggle and the mass movement grew out of the desperate conditions of an impoverished and suffering people who saw no hope in a system that they could not identify with, where power remained in the hands of the few privileged business and landlord interests in collaboration with international capital.

Armed struggle and the mass movement were therefore developed by the people's revolutionary movement as arenas of battle for the attainment of structural change. Necessarily, for as long as these oppressive structures remain uncorrected, the validity of a militant and direct people's action in defense of one's right to be liberated remains.

One of the more fundamental lessons we could learn from the experiences of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union is the justness of direct, militant political action against oppressive regimes and leaders who have long been isolated by bureaucratic and authoritarian rule. Considering the fact that the masses of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union succeeded in overthrowing their discredited leaders, why should a direct and militant mass action be relevant in their case and outmoded in ours?

The western press consistently places in the limelight every "democracy rally" it monitors against the leadership of the former socialist states. On the other hand, the marches and rallies in the capitalist countries and in the Third World, which are in essence aimed at the restoration of real economic and political freedoms, are relegated to the sidelines.

There is no room to lament the possible demise of militant popular actions, whether armed or unarmed, in the Third World today. Popular movements – national liberation movements – shall continue to assert their relevance in the hearts and minds of all oppressed peoples who dare to dream and continue the struggle for a better tomorrow. ❁